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## FEATURED Q&A

# Why Are Colombian Rights Activists Being Targeted?



Human rights activists have been increasingly targeted in Colombia. A tribute to slain social activists in Colombia's Chocó department is pictured above. // File Photo: United Nations.

**Q** The United States has raised concerns with the Colombian government about the violence against human rights defenders in the South American country, a State Department spokesman said in mid-February. The statement came a day after Human Rights Watch called on Colombia to do more to stop the killings of human rights activists. What are the main reasons behind the escalation in killings of human rights activists in Colombia? How much is Colombian President Iván Duque's government doing to protect rights activists, and what more should it do? How much pressure is the United States willing to exert on Colombia in this area, and what actions might it take to do so?

**A** Francisco Santos Calderón, Colombia's ambassador to the United States: "The government of Colombia has exalted the work of social leaders and human rights defenders and condemned the attacks and threats against them. A striking pattern underlies these crimes: investigations by the Colombian attorney general's office found that in nearly 70 percent of cases, illegal armed groups are the perpetrators, and the seven states with the highest numbers of homicides of social leaders are those with the highest concentration of coca crops. The government is taking an integral approach to protecting communities and human rights defenders, working decisively on peace implementation (including rural development and victims' reparation) while combating and dismantling these criminal organizations through law enforcement (security, territorial control and justice). The National Protection Unit, with a budget increase of 49 percent (or \$800

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Brazil Has World's Highest Daily Covid Death Toll

Brazil, where a virulent strain of the novel coronavirus has run rampant, has surpassed the United States as the country with the world's highest daily death toll from Covid-19.

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### POLITICAL

## Mexico's Lower House Approves Recreational Use of Marijuana

The lower house of Mexico's Congress approved the legalization of recreational marijuana, sending the measure to the Senate.

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### ECONOMIC

## White House to Set Conditions on Aid to Central America

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden will set conditions on the \$4 billion in aid it plans to provide to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. The conditions will focus on anti-corruption and good-governance measures.

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Biden // File Photo: White House.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Brazil Has World's Highest Daily Covid-19 Death Toll

Brazil has surpassed the United States as the country with the world's highest daily death toll from Covid-19, The Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday. The South American country's death toll from the disease soared to 2,286 on Wednesday, its highest total yet during the pandemic. The United States' number of recorded Covid-19 deaths on Tuesday was 1,947. The seven-day average number of deaths in Brazil has risen to 1,573, while the rate in the United States fell to 1,566 on average, the newspaper reported, citing Our World in Data at the University of Oxford. The United States hit a peak of just more than 3,400 daily deaths from Covid-19 in January. Part of the reason for Brazil's surge in infections is the rapid spread of the P.1 strain of the novel coronavirus, according to public health experts. The strain, which has radiated from the Amazonian city of Manaus, has been shown in studies to be more contagious and better able to cause reinfections than previous versions of Covid-19. Researchers say Brazil is now a breeding ground for hundreds of new variants of the coronavirus, which health experts say could spawn more dangerous versions of the disease the longer it is allowed to mutate. The situation could also threaten progress that other countries have made in fighting Covid-19, The Wall Street Journal reported. Public health experts have also blamed Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro for the disease's spread. Since the World Health Organization declared the outbreak a pandemic a year ago, Bolsonaro has downplayed the disease and recently told Brazilians to "stop whining" about it. He has called for businesses to reopen and is rarely seen in public wearing a face mask, a basic measure that health experts around the world have urged to curb the virus' spread. Brazil has administered 5.6 doses of Covid-19 vaccines per 100 people, The New York Times reported, citing Our World in Data. While that exceeds

several other countries in Latin America, it lags countries including Chile, which has administered 30.6 doses per 100 people, and the United States, which has administered 28.8 doses per 100 people. "We are concerned about the situation in Brazil. It provides a sober reminder of the threat of resurgence: areas hit hard by the virus in the past are still vulnerable to infection today," said Carissa Etienne, the director of the Pan American Health Organization, Reuters reported.

## Brazil's Lula Blasts Bolsonaro, Avoids Hinting at Run

Former Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on Wednesday blasted current President Jair Bolsonaro over his management of the country and its economy amid the Covid-19 pandemic, but the former leader avoided hinting at whether he plans to again seek the nation's highest office, the Associated Press reported. Lula's press conference at the metalworkers' union that he once headed in São Bernardo do Campo, outside São Paulo, were his first comments since a Supreme Court justice annulled two corruption convictions against the former president. Justice Edson Fachin annulled the convictions on Monday, saying the cases were tried in the wrong jurisdiction. Fachin said the case should be retried in Brasília, but former prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol said in a tweet that a trial in the capital may be impossible because the statute of limitations for the cases may have expired, the AP reported. On Wednesday, Lula said political dialogue must be restored in Brazil despite the country's divisions. "Do not be afraid of me," he said. "This country has no government, this country doesn't take care of the economy, of job creation, wages, health care, the environment, education, young people." Lula, who was in office from 2003 to 2010, said Bolsonaro must be stopped from being re-elected, but he said his Workers' Party will choose its candidate "at the appropriate time." Lula was imprisoned in April 2018 and was behind bars when Bolsonaro was elected in October of that year. He was freed

## NEWS BRIEFS

## Colombian Defense Chief Won't Confirm Reports of Minors' Deaths in Attack

Colombian Defense Minister Diego Molano on Wednesday would not confirm reports that children were among those killed in a recent military attack on a rebel camp, The New York Times reported. In an interview with local W radio, Molano said that "young combatants" were present at the camp, without providing their ages. The youth had been recruited and transformed into "machines of war" by criminal actors, Molano said. Local news outlets have reported that one or more of those killed were minors, including a 9-year-old girl.

## Mexico's Lower House Approves Recreational Cannabis Legalization

Mexico's Chamber of Deputies on Wednesday approved the legalization of recreational marijuana on a vote of 316-129, The New York Times reported. The measure now heads to the Senate, which is expected to easily approve it. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador has also signaled support for the legalization. Mexico legalized cannabis for medical uses three years ago. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in the Feb. 2 issue of the Advisor.]

## Argentina Lifts Ban on Boeing's 737 MAX

Argentina has lifted its flight ban on the Boeing 737 MAX airplane, local newspaper Página 12 reported today. The National Administration of Civil Aviation had put the prohibition in place following two plane crashes in 2018 and 2019, in Indonesia and Ethiopia. Other countries had also implemented similar measures, though some countries, including the United States, have lifted the ban. Aerolíneas Argentinas, the only carrier in the South American country that owns Boeing 737 MAX planes, will again be able to operate them.

in November 2019 when the country's highest court ruled that a person can be imprisoned only after all appeals are exhausted. Last week-end, a poll by the Ipec institute showed that 50 percent of respondents said they might vote for Lula in the country's 2022 presidential election if he were to run, as compared to 38 percent who voiced support for Bolsonaro, Bloomberg News reported.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

# Biden Administration to Set Conditions on Central America Aid

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden will set conditions on the \$4 billion in aid it plans to provide to Central American countries, with a focus on their commitment to anti-corruption and good-governance measures, the White House said Wednesday, Bloomberg News reported. Biden's government said in January that it was planning to disburse the aid to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in an effort to tackle the root causes of migration that lead hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to flee their countries, frequently to the United States. Members of Congress and foreign policy experts have called on making the aid contingent on several commitments so as to avoid the money going toward supporting corrupt regimes, according to the report. The Biden administration said the requirements for the aid would include transparent accounting, fair elections and respect for human rights. "I want to emphasize that the funds we're asking from Congress don't go to government leaders," said Roberta Jacobson, special assistant to Biden and coordinator for the southern border, at a White House press briefing. "They go to communities, to training, to climate mitigation, to violence prevention, to anti-gang programs ... They go to the people who otherwise migrate in search of hope," she added. Jacobson said the plan would also encompass the private sector in those countries.

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million) provides 3,800 social leaders with individual protection schemes and, along with other agencies, collective schemes to many more. The attorney general's office has achieved a 63.08 percent solve rate in prosecuting these crimes. Local attention of early warnings through the interagency committee for early warning response (CIPRAT) increased 64 percent despite pandemic-related mobility restrictions, with timely responses to 201 warnings. The operational segment of the Timely Action Plan (PAO), whose purpose is protecting the life and integrity of every social leader, has increased its effectiveness going from eight to 24 arrest warrants from 2019 to 2020. PAO's social strategy supports and strengthens community programs to highlight the leadership exercised by human rights defenders. There is still a long road ahead to ensure safety and protection for all social leaders, but the government continues to work resolutely to that end."

**A** **Gwen Burnyeat, junior research fellow in anthropology at Merton College, University of Oxford:** "The killings of human rights activists and former FARC combatants in Colombia are partly due to the Duque government's lackluster implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, especially those strategies envisaged to prevent targeted violence. These include the National Commission on Security Guarantees, the Comprehensive Security System for the Exercise of Politics and the National Protection Unit, which has serious budget and personnel shortfalls, as the U.N. Verification Mission recently highlighted. The United States should call on the Duque government to fully implement the peace agreement, prioritizing crop substitution and rural development over forced aerial fumigation, which is proven to increase violence. Also driving insecurity is the political polarization over the peace agreement, which the Duque government helped create and continues to fan in the

run-up to the 2022 elections. Many of those killed were supporting and participating in the implementation, including in crop substitution, local development programs and transitional justice processes, which seek to clarify the truth about the conflict and foster reconciliation. The Investigation and Accusation Unit of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) leads a multi-stakeholder Risk Monitoring System, which issues early warnings and preventative recommendations. This system reports intensifying hate speech and death threats online and offline to defendants and victims participating in the JEP, which threatens transitional justice progress. The United States could support this unit, and internationally recognize the crucial role that the JEP, the Truth Commission and the Unit for the Search of the Disappeared play in peacebuilding, and encourage public appropriation of their internationally groundbreaking work."

**A** **Miguel Gomis Balestreri, director of the Department of International Relations at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá:** "As in any post-conflict country, the violence in Colombia has not stopped. The assassinations of social leaders are the most visible facet of a disappointing implementation of the peace accords. On the one hand, there are several causes. First, the state's territorialization deficit is evident: it has not filled the void left by the FARC in territories now disputed by criminal actors (illegal mining, deforestation and drugs); the murders are blamed on 'the violent ones' when much of the violence is actually political. The criminals want to eliminate the engines of socioeconomic modernization, and the state is deceiving itself with the tools of electronic administration. Second, today the murders are more visible: before they were conflict, now they are state failure. Third, violence increased during the pandemic because attention is focused on other problems and cities live in self-absorption.

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On the other hand, there is the response of the national government. Efforts exist, but they fail in their coordination, times and methods by attacking the symptoms instead of the causes. The securitization of social problems is an attempt by the government to reverse the opening of the sociopolitical agenda it inherited from the Santos government. The Duque government is not responding well because it neither understands nor seeks to understand the country's new reality. Finally, the international community and the United States can exert pressure, but it will be difficult to take real steps. There are regional and national oligarchies that want to take advantage of disorder to strengthen their arsonist extractivist model (in both a real and figurative sense). Paradoxically, the greater the violence, the more latent the exhaustion of traditional politics. Colombia has awakened, and the elites do not know how to handle it."

**A** **Elizabeth Dickinson, senior analyst for Colombia at International Crisis Group:** "The alarming rise in killings of social leaders is symptomatic of the increasing fragmentation of conflict in Colombia. After the 2016 peace accord between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) saw the powerful insurgent group demobilize, a mix of new and pre-existing armed and criminal groups sought to take their place. They have clawed their way into territories and taken over rackets the former rebels left behind. Not powerful enough to confront state forces directly, they have cemented their authority using assassinations and intimidation to silence critics and establish territorial control in the countryside. Threats and violence against social leaders—individuals who campaign for individual rights or community causes—send a clear message to communities about who is in charge and what they will tolerate. Intimidation and assassination can silence

parts of the population or cause them to flee. Powerful political and economic actors use the same tactics, often covering their tracks by employing third parties to threaten or kill. With the government distracted and communities on lockdown, killings of social leaders have only worsened during the pandemic. Bogotá's primary response has been to provide roughly 5,000 individ-

“**The alarming rise in killings of social leaders is symptomatic of the increasing fragmentation of conflict in Colombia.**”

— Elizabeth Dickinson

ual protection schemes for at-risk leaders. While these security details have saved lives and demonstrated the government's will to protect leaders, the system is expensive, unwieldy and does little to change the conditions generating violence. Coordination across the government bodies charged with addressing this challenge is weak, while corruption and limited capacity in local law enforcement and the judiciary mean few crimes against social leaders are solved. The United States has joined a chorus of international actors expressing concern about the plight of social leaders. In engaging Bogotá, Washington should stress the importance of carrying out rural reforms to loosen the grip of criminal groups on illicit economies, step up support for communities' own initiatives to protect themselves and their leaders and pour new efforts and resources into ending impunity for those who commit these crimes."

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at [gkuleta@thedialogue.org](mailto:gkuleta@thedialogue.org).*

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